

Gazette Opinion: Lawmakers must CHIP away kids' care barrier

U.S. Sen. Max Baucus and a ballroom full of parents, health-care professionals and policy makers this week turned the spotlight on national efforts to insure American children. Baucus, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, held a hearing in Billings to get ideas on improving the federal Children's Health Insurance Program, which will expire in September. Baucus said reauthorizing and expanding CHIP is his No. 1 health-care priority and he pledged to have it accomplished well before the Sept. 30 deadline.

In Montana, the state's Children's Health Insurance Plan faces a tighter deadline. Any improvement of the program for the next two years must be authorized by the Legislature before it adjourns in the next three weeks.

Senate Bill 22 sponsored by Sen. Dan Weinberg proposes to expand eligibility by raising the maximum family income from 150 percent of poverty to 175 percent of poverty (\$36,177 annual income for a family of four). It's estimated that 2,100 additional uninsured Montana children could be enrolled with this change. Covering those children would cost the state about \$900,000 a year and the federal government would pay about \$3.1 million a year, if the federal program is reauthorized without change.

If SB22 passes, Montana would still have the tightest family income restriction on CHIP eligibility of any state, except for North Dakota.

Five Republican senators and all Senate Democrats, including Kim Gillan, Lane Larson and Lynda Moss supported SB22. The no votes included all Yellowstone County's GOP senators, Roy Brown, Jeff Essmann, Kelly Gebhardt, Dan McGee and Corey Stapleton.

The CHIP bill had a hearing Monday in the House Appropriations Committee. It will need bipartisan support to reach the House floor. If you want to see Montana expand efforts to get timely health care to its children, let your state representative know immediately. Rep. Bill Glaser, R-Huntley is a member of the appropriations committee, but support from any one of our Republican legislators could make a do-or-die difference on this bill.

At the Baucus hearing Wednesday, Dr. Janis Langohr, a pediatrician at the Children's Clinic in Billings, described some of the many cases of delayed medical care she has seen in her practice:

- A toddler with such rotten teeth and infected ears that he went on to develop an exquisitely painful and life-threatening infection of the bone behind the ear.
- A teenage diabetic who shared her insulin with her uninsured diabetic family member to the detriment of both.
- An asthmatic youngster who made annual trips by life flight to a Billings hospital to spend a couple of days on life support before picking up a new supply of asthma drugs that had been depleted long ago.

"All cases represent common childhood maladies that were left unattended and became life threatening," Langohr testified. "The cost of these cases to our health care system and our state was staggering. ... They could have been prevented by providing these children with regular access to routine medical surveillance and care."

Montana House members should join their Senate colleagues in seizing this opportunity to provide more Montana families with access to health care for their children. If SB22 doesn't pass, two more years will be lost to children who need regular check-ups, immunizations and urgent care. It will be two more years of low- to moderate-income working parents agonizing over how to pay for medical emergencies when they couldn't afford medical insurance.